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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 JEDDAH 000379

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [KISL](#) [KPAL](#) [KWMN](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#)
SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH TABUK GOVERNOR: "ROAD MAP,"
EXTREMISM, REFORM, AND EDUCATION IN NORTHERN SAUDI ARABIA.

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On May 16, the Consul General and Pol/Econ Chief met Prince Fahad, Governor of Tabuk. In a wide-ranging discussion of Middle Eastern and domestic conditions, Prince Fahad singled out the Palestinian problem as the most critical issue and a fundamental cause of extremism in the region and called for U.S. and world support for the Peace Process. Fahad strongly backed the administration's Iraq policy and lauded President Bush personally. The Governor insisted that the Saudi-Jordanian border was secure. He discussed his support for improving the position of women, but advocated measured change to permit social attitudes to evolve. Fahad supported dramatically increasing travel between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and asked that the mission facilitate issuance of student visas. In response to the CG's advocacy of greater cooperation in the education field, he introduced the prospect of seeking a U.S. university as a joint operator of a new university in Tabuk. Prince Fahad keeps close control of affairs in the region. END SUMMARY.

TABUK OCCUPIES SENSITIVE POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

12. (C) On May 16, the Consul General and Pol/Econ Chief met with long-serving Tabuk Governor Prince Fahad bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz. The meeting was held in the executive office of the Governor's Palace in the city of Tabuk. The Governor inaugurated the meeting with a lengthy summary of his observations on the Middle East situation. He first accentuated his role as Governor of a province occupying a critical location in the Middle East, observing that from Al-Haql, the northern-most Saudi community on the Gulf of Aqaba, one could look down the road to Jordan, then across the Gulf to the Egyptian Sinai and between the two lay Israel. Although stressing its geographical proximity to other important parts of the Middle East, significantly, the Governor avoided any reference to the large military presence in Tabuk. In fact, Tabuk, the city, is headquarters of the army and air force commands guarding northwestern Saudi Arabia, as well as units that guard the sensitive Saudi-Jordanian border and 700 km. of coastline.

PALESTINE PROBLEM THREATENS TO INFECT THE REGION

13. (C) Prince Fahad voiced great concern over the Palestinian debacle. He warned that continuing disorder there could inspire extremism throughout the Middle East. He assured the CG that Saudi Arabia was doing everything practicable to eradicate extremism in the Kingdom, but cautioned that solving the Palestinian problem was the only decisive way to undermine the call of extremists. He strongly endorsed the "Road Map," as well as other international efforts to end the conflict, such as the plan advanced by King Abdullah, while still Crown Prince, at the Arab League.

ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS MUST "SIT AND TALK"

14. (C) Elaborating on Palestine, he asserted that the solution ultimately depended on negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. They must "sit and talk." The Governor was quick to add that all of the problems must be solved, such as the Syrian problem, in order to ensure that all parties will be satisfied and not create obstacles which could derail an agreement.

DEMOCRACY WILL FORCE HAMAS TO NEGOTIATE OR RESIGN

15. (C) The Governor conceded that HAMAS will be reluctant to negotiate, but he suggested that the democratic process that brought them to power could force them to act responsibly. In voting for HAMAS, he suggested, the Palestinians were voting for a government that functioned, in contrast to a corrupt, ineffectual Fatah. Already, HAMAS is failing to maintain government services which discredits its claim to authority. If the Palestinian President negotiates, the

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HAMAS-dominated Palestinian Authority will have the choice of collaborating in negotiations or resigning and calling for new elections. Fahad believed that this will ultimately be beneficial for the Peace Process.

BUSH MUST PUSH ISRAEL TO ENGAGE PALESTINIANS

16. (C) The major powers, the Quartet, led by the U.S., and other influential powers such as Japan and China, and the Arabs, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, must be prepared to support the Peace Process. He noted that President Bush is soon to meet with new Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, and he pleaded that the President push the Israelis to engage in the Peace Process. "Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas)," he announced, "is the legitimate representative of the Palestinians and the Israelis should negotiate with him. If the Palestinian Authority does not support his agreements," he repeated, "they should call new elections and allow the people to vote."

WORLD MUST PREVENT THE SUFFERING OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

17. (C) While the Peace Process continues, the world community must, Fahad insisted, succor the Palestinian people. He warned that continued suffering by the people would be a catastrophe, not only for the Palestinian people, but for other nations whose populations are sympathetic to the Palestinians. Anger against the West and Arab governments seen as indifferent to the lot of the Palestinians is growing rapidly in those states. There followed a passionate soliloquy questioning how anyone could sleep knowing of the terrible suffering endured by the innocent people of the Palestinian territories.

IRAQ: HISTORY WILL VINDICATE PRESIDENT BUSH

18. (C) In reference to Iraq, Prince Fahad admitted that Iraq constituted a very dangerous threat, but he believed that the cost was justified. He pronounced Saddam Hussein "probably the worst ruler in the Middle East in 2,000 or 3,000 years."

Continuing, he said the Iraqi people are being betrayed by opportunists and blamed the media for exaggerated reports and propaganda that encouraged the insurgents. As an example, he cited the fact that the preponderance of the violence is Iraqi on Iraqi violence, not involving American troops. Although concerned about the situation, he endorsed Egyptian President Mubarak's assessment that a pull-out now would be disastrous. He ended by extolling "George Bush (as a leader who) had the will to make tough decisions and the strength to see the mission through." He commended the President for his steadfastness and expressed confidence that "History will support his decision."

JORDANIAN BORDER PEACEFUL AND WELL PATROLLED?

¶9. (C) After the Governor had concluded his remarks, the CG inquired about conditions along the border, specifically if there had been any problems with weapons smuggling, since the media had reported arms connected with HAMAS being discovered in southern Jordan. The Governor responded positively stating that he had no knowledge of any smuggling or arms trafficking in the border region. He said that King Abdullah is doing his utmost to secure the border which is closely monitored and patrolled. He also expressed his satisfaction at the degree of cooperation between Jordan and the Kingdom in ensuring border security. He ended by saying there were no border troubles in Saudi Arabia. NOTE: On the following day, May 17, the Saudi Gazette carried a small article saying that Police in Tabuk seized five rifles, a pistol and a machine gun and ammunition. END NOTE.

TOURISM

¶10. (C) The CG next asked the Governor about the prospects for tourism in the region. Fahad answered that tourism was viewed as an important sector for economic growth in the region. Domestic and religious tourism represents the primary target, but the Governor also intends to encourage

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non-Muslim tourists. He reported that representatives of a German academic institution had just visited Taima in connection with archaeological researches. He recommended the many archaeological sites within the state and invited the CG to visit the region's museums and ruins.

ROLE OF WOMEN

¶11. (C) Prince Fahad also expressed his support for improving the status of women. He has proposed that the local cultural society should be opened for women and noted that in many fields women had already made important strides, although this has gone unnoticed by the press. He said that that very night, he was participating in a ceremony to present awards sponsored by the Kingdom recognizing the ten best farms in each state. These awards were among the most prestigious awards in the agricultural sector, and two of the 10 awards in Tabuk were being presented to women.

U.S.-SAUDI WOMEN'S NETWORK

¶12. (C) The CG brought up the prospective visit of NEA Senior Advisor Elizabeth Walsh to Saudi Arabia in June or July in order to promote a network between Saudi Arabian and American women. The Governor expressed a willingness to support such a program, but he strongly advised against any visit to the Kingdom in June or July. Domestic custom results in a substantial portion of the key figures being away from their homes during this interval. He personally recommended that Ms. Walsh consider the dates September 9-23.

REFORM MUST OVERCOME CUSTOM, NOT RELIGION

¶13. (C) Continuing on the theme of the role of women, he said he personally disliked making a distinction between men and women. People are people in his estimation, and it is

false and useless to attempt to make artificial distinctions between them. However, he admitted that there are very deeply held social customs prevailing in the Kingdom that limit the freedom of women. He lamented that the West typically ascribes this condition to the Islamic religion, rather than social custom. He cautioned that government should not attempt to emancipate women through laws. He felt it was unwise to attempt to legislate changes in social attitudes. While delaying reform now, he was confident that changes in social attitudes will occur in the fullness of time. He volunteered that this change would be beneficial to the society and economy. He observed that there were approximately 1.3 million foreigners employed as drivers in Saudi Arabia. "If women were able to drive," he estimated, "600,000 to 700,000 drivers would no longer be needed and could be sent home, and all that money could be devoted to more useful activities here."

MUST BURNISH IMAGE OF SAUDI ARABIA

¶14. (C) The Governor deplored the poor image Saudi Arabia endured in the West. For this, he primarily blamed the media, which only focuses on the negative. He advocated increased interchange between academics and business-people and strongly supported travel by Saudis to the United States. Recalling his own student days, he was confident that if Saudis visited the U.S., and not just the major coastal cities, but the heartland, they would return with respect for the U.S., and Americans would develop an understanding of Arabs and Muslims.

¶15. (C) The Governor was very pleased that there were now more than 10,000 Saudi students studying in the U.S., but reminded us that when he was studying at the University of Southern California in the early 1970's, there were over 40,000 Saudi students in the U.S. He insisted that it was vital to reach that figure again. He then advised us that "The Embassy must be gentle with visas," although he hastily added that there could be no compromise on security.

FORGING NEW SAUDI-AMERICAN CONNECTIONS

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¶16. (C) The Consul General asked the Governor if there was any assistance the Consulate could offer to help promote development. The Governor promised that at that night's awards ceremony, he would mention the Consulate and encourage people to employ its resources. The CG also informed the Governor that the Consulate had hired a new Education Adviser and offered her services to interested Saudi students to help them make better decisions involving educational opportunities in America. Accepting this offer with gratitude, Prince Fahad mentioned that the Saudi government had just agreed to permit construction of a new private university in Tabuk. The initial phase would be a polytechnic teaching computers, science and technology. This phase would be followed by medical and engineering faculties. The college's supporters plan to approach an American university to act as joint operator. According to the Governor, Columbia is their primary choice for partner, and he requested assistance from the Consulate in pursuing this plan.

THE GOVERNOR'S LEGACY APPARENT AROUND TABUK

¶17. (C) The meeting was followed by a short tour of Tabuk. The guide insisted on showing the CG a new auditorium and convention center, named after the governor, which the managers proudly stated could hold more than 2,000 people and was available to all government organizations for assemblies and conferences. The CG agreed that it would be a suitable venue for large gatherings. In response to the CG's inquiry, the manager stated that theatrical or other entertainment events were not contemplated.

¶18. (C) There followed a tour of a new social and cultural center, also named after the Prince, which offers meeting rooms, computers, a library, natural history education, and sports and a swimming pool. The Director, a doctor, proudly told the CG that patrons are required to undergo a physical examination to ensure they are free of dermatological and contagious conditions before they may swim in the pool. Although open to all residents without cost, the facility requires all potential patrons to first join the association managing the complex. While presently open only to men, the managers are currently considering establishing alternating days in which women will be permitted to use the center and its facilities.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

¶19. (C) Born in Riyadh on October 20, 1950, Prince Fahad bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz is the full brother of former Ambassador to the United States Prince Sultan. Fahad obtained a B.A. in History from King Saud University in Riyadh in 1970 and earned a postgraduate degree in History from the University of Southern California. He has headed several UN social welfare commissions and has been the Acting President of the Saudi Youth Welfare organization. He is Vice President of the Saudi Soccer Association, the Saudi Olympic Committee and President of the Saudi Athletics Association and Arab Athletics Association. He headed the Saudi mission to the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984. He has been governor of Tabuk since about 1987. He is reputed to be very proud of Tabuk's agriculture, especially its cut flower industry.

GOVERNOR CALLS THE SHOTS

¶20. (C) Prince Fahad is indisputably a modernizer who sees change as essential to the future of the Kingdom, but is not inclined to push development faster than he believes social attitudes will easily accept. He is also known as an iron-fisted administrator, so much so that he has earned the sobriquet "Stalin" among some of his less admiring countrymen. A glimpse of this controlling attitude may have been provided by the CG's visit. Application had been made to visit Prince Sultan Air Force base in Tabuk, where three American officers are stationed. After weeks of hesitation, MFA intimated that the visit would be permitted. As the day

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of the trip approached, encouraging signs continued to be offered to the Consulate that the visit would be approved, although probably only on the morning of the visit. Only after the CG was in Tabuk was the visit finally denied. Sources hinted that the visit was canceled because the Governor did not approve. It was also suggested that an earlier request to visit the commanding officer of the Tabuk border command had also been denied at the instigation of the Governor. Also worthy of passing comment is the fact that for the first time during her numerous trips around the consular district, the CG's hotel room was guarded by armed soldiers.

¶21. (C) COMMENT: This Governor, like most others, supports modernization. However, this governor, according to all evidence, is determined to call the shots himself. He is only likely to cooperate with initiatives that appeal to him, and is unlikely to accede to and would probably obstruct any initiatives with which he does not agree. Consequently, any efforts to promote U.S.-Saudi cooperation in Tabuk will have to be pursued very carefully, ensuring that they do not arouse the Governor's opposition. END COMMENT.
Gfoeller